

*How Soon Is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*, by Carolyn Dinshaw. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. Pp. 251. ISBN: 9780822353676.

Carolyn Dinshaw's *How Soon Is Now?* critically examines moments of asynchronous and queered time in a variety of medieval texts and juxtaposes them against often centuries later amateur readers in order to reveal out-of-sync desires. She argues that her work brings "amateur and professional reading together . . . to help create conditions in which further attachments can be made, between and among people, times, and worlds" (38). Throughout the chapters, each of which centers on a different example of asynchronous time, Dinshaw successfully reminds her readers that traditionally western linear time can limit our understanding of life, eternity, and culture.

In order to frame the concept of time and *now*, Dinshaw begins her introduction with an analysis of The Smiths' 1984 song, "How Soon Is Now?" The lyrics, sung by Morrissey, lead singer of The Smiths, form a background not only to the introduction, but to Dinshaw's entire discussion of asynchronous temporalities. She links the desire for authenticity with queerness, Morrissey's asexual desires, and amateurism, providing a commonality between the scholarly and the recreational. Moving then linearly from Aristotle, for whom time was measured through change, to Augustine, who believed that God regulates time (and therefore life), Dinshaw plots an ironic timeline of the philosophical concept of time. She then "cuts her own queer critical path . . . by invoking the concept of amateurism" (20) whose explorations of the Middle Ages are "a neoliberal fantasy" (23), passionate and innovative; amateurs are not bound by the same principles as trained professionals, and therefore "can help us to contemplate different ways of being, knowing and world making" (24).

Dinshaw's first chapter, "Asynchrony Stories," focuses on asynchronous temporalities in three texts, two of which are decidedly Christian while the third incorporates a Briton/Saxon past; in each example, individuals experience multiple *nows* simultaneously. Although noting that similar examples appear in tales of the underworld within Celtic texts, she states her examination covers "temporal warps . . . in the mundane world" (42). Each text links time and reproduction: "if . . . queerness is experienced, at least in part, in and *as* time, patriarchal reproduction is, too" (44). In the first example, Dinshaw considers "The Monk and the Bird," a sermon found in the *Northern Homily Cycle*, focusing on the relationship between the eternal timelessness that is God and humankind's corporeal time. She maintains that "Christian scriptural history . . .

is a temporal construct of anticipation and fulfillment” (45)—anticipation for the second coming and fulfillment of the Word. For Christians struggling with this idea, the Monk, who listens to the bird’s song out in the woods only to find three hundred years have passed upon his return to the monastery, demonstrates the dual structure of the exemplum; the passing of three hundred years within the length of the birdsong equals the timelessness of God and of eternity, while the monk’s concept of time is likened to that of humanity. Likewise, the tale of the Seven Sleepers who believe that only a single night has passed instead of two hundred and forty-six years until the end of Christian persecution offers a similar exemplum. Her only example without Christian overtones is the story of King Herla who attends the wedding of a mysterious “pygmy” only to find that 300 years have passed. Dinshaw then looks to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s inclusion of “The Monk” in the *Golden Legend*, arguing that “reading and recounting medieval texts foster a positive asynchrony, bringing the past into the present” (68) while his “desire for another time, or another kind of time, is a queer desire” (71).

In her second chapter, “Temporally Oriented,” Dinshaw connects multiple temporalities demonstrated in *The Book of John Mandeville*, a text that she describes as “dense with different kinds of time, experiences of time, and desires for different temporal experiences, all of which unfold as the narrative moves east” (75). She argues that Mandeville’s statement of drinking from the well at Polombe, a supposed fountain of youth in India, combines both the past and present tenses—having drunk in the past but yet feeling well in the present. This fountain that defies time originates in Paradise, invoking the Christian sense of simultaneous temporalities while simultaneously demonstrating a desire for another time all together. Furthermore, traveling east means traveling back in time toward “heterogeneous temporalities” (78). For Mandeville, Paradise or Eden exists outside the plane of material time, and the effects of the well transpose that timelessness with material time. Moving to Mandeville’s amateur readers, Dinshaw examines nineteenth-century texts by Henry Yule, Andrew Lang, and M. R. James, which “equate India with the medieval” (76) and utilize Middle English voices, styles, and syntax, representing a queered “affective identification and desire” (95). Connecting these writers to her family history, Dinshaw explores the “imperial asynchrony” her father experienced in a Pakistani junior college when he read about “alleged English cultural superiority” (101). Her father’s simultaneous disidentification with his ethnic heritage and privileging of western progress resulted in Dinshaw herself feeling like an amateur who is not quite in sync with the rest of contemporary society.

Following a similar organization, Dinshaw's third chapter, "In the Now," connects Margery Kemp's asynchronous temporalities to her first major editor, Hope Emily Allen, and then to her own experiences reading both the manuscript and Allen's papers. Dinshaw expands upon the out-of-sync religious temporalities from her first chapter to consider how Margery's visions and contemplations take her out of time. She argues that Margery herself is an amateur and her responses to the clergy serve as a spiritual reminder that the sacrifice of Christ is and should always be present. Likewise, Hope Allen's work on the *Book of Margery Kempe* trapped her "in an uncontrolled, indeed uncontrollable, past" (127). As a woman, she was considered an amateur in relation to her male colleagues while her inability to focus on a single thread until its end and lack of time and organization during her work on the *Book of Margery Kempe* II rendered her out of time. Dinshaw then links Hope Allen's reading of Margery with her own reading of Hope Allen's personal correspondence, describing a "queer intimacy" brought on by the "transformative act of reading and self-recognition" (126).

Both the fourth chapter, "Out of Sync in the Catskills," and the epilogue, "The Lay of the Land," diverge from the previous structures; instead of beginning with multiple temporalities present in medieval texts, they begin with the more modern examples of "Rip Van Winkle" and the 1940s film, *A Canterbury Tale*, and work backward, invoking Chaucer, desire, and medieval amateur readers. She examines the (un)fulfilled desires of Rip and Thomas Colpeper respectively to make the past new as they exist out of time, defined and redefined by medieval sensibilities and asynchronous moments.

Dinshaw presents a compelling argument linking time, desire, and queerness. Her explorations into the medieval past and the amateur reader serve as a reminder "to look for other ways of world making, for other ways of knowing, doing, being. . . . to revalue such failures, amateurisms, nonmodern temporalities, and the attachments they foster" (170). Acknowledging the privilege of linear temporalities in our understanding of the Middle Ages, Dinshaw's readings necessitate our own rereading of these texts and other medieval artifacts.

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